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# Review of Edges of Global Justice: The World Social Forum and Its “Others” by Janet M. Conway

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**Edges of Global Justice: The World Social Forum and its  
Others.**

**By  
Janet Conway**

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Routledge

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True to its title, *Edges of Global Justice*, in this path-breaking book, Janet Conway illuminates both the leading and the outer edges of the World Social Forum (WSF) as a global event and process of pursuing global justice. Aware of the methodological and epistemological limits of analyzing such a complex phenomenon, her methodology “walks forward questioning,” and her epistemology acknowledges “the limits of my own knowledge, its partial, positional, and situated character, and the therefore open-ended nature of my conclusions” (pg. 5). Informed by this self-delimiting approach, she conceptualizes the WSF as a global political and cultural project and interrogates, in a sympathetic yet critical manner, the theory and praxis of some major currents within the WSF: the new politics of open space, WSF as global civil society, the new politics of autonomist theorizations, and feminisms. Using a post-colonial, anti-racist, feminist and practice-based approach, her main argument is that the WSF is a product of the emancipatory traditions of Western modernity, a site of contention among those traditions as well as the site where subaltern presences demonstrate the limits of those traditions. Yet in the current conjuncture of Neoliberal capitalist expansion and neo-imperial, “anti-terrorism,” albeit problematic, the WSF might be one of the instances of hope for transformation of those traditions as well as of the movements that constitute it.

Engaging the vast literature that now exists on the WSF, and in which this book will now be a must-read, Conway begins by challenging the understanding of many commentators that the non-intelligibility of the project in process is desirable. She argues that this obscures the operations of power within it. Furthermore, in describing the genealogies of the WSF she reminds us to go beyond the anti-globalization protests in the Global North, to focus on the specific struggles in Brazil and Latin America as well as the Global South more generally and not to dismiss the contributions of the new social movements to this process. Similarly, she is critical of the WSF and its mostly male and “light-skinned” analysts for not recognizing that some of its defining practices are shaped

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by the young, white, autonomists from the Global North and feminists from the North and South.

Her analysis of WSF as an open space versus deliberative movement shows that after much internal contestations, the open space conception has won. Yet, she argues that these debates are those of the Brazilian and Latin American Left. And although, as the WSF moved from Brazil to India then Kenya, Dakar and beyond, subaltern groups disrupted this dynamic it did not displace it. Rather, subaltern actors were included as subordinates and given the material inequalities and their political modalities. She wonders if they can be easily assimilated or engaged as epistemological equals. In a similar vein, Conway highlights the contradictions of the WSF as global civil society. She argues that the WSF's praxis moves beyond Habermasian and Gramscian understandings of it and is influenced by the radical Latin American politics and might therefore be better captured by Sen's (2007) conception of incivil -- as opposed to civil or uncivil -- which focuses on the ways in which the insurgent are producing their own associational forms and articulating issues that go beyond those shaped by the state and market dichotomies of Western civil societies. About the autonomist trend, she argues that it is a particular Euro-American product embodied by young, white men. While others have noted this demographic composition, few have analyzed it as Conway does to demonstrate how some of the underlying principles of autonomy, such as self-organizing, involve privilege and how that leaves out the subaltern. By reinscribing the coloniality of power and knowledge they are at the outer edges, but to the extent that they emphasize anti-statist, anti-capitalist and prefigurative non-violent politics in everyday life they are at the leading edges of the WSF.

In the chapter on feminisms, she demonstrates convincingly how the culture of the WSF reflects practices of hegemonic Latin American masculinities, captured by the concept of the Porto Alegre Men. Through their intersectional analysis of neoliberalism, focus on embodied issues such as reproductive rights and sexuality, transversal practices of solidarity and coalition building, and knowledge as praxis, feminists are at the leading edges of the WSF. Yet, they often operate in silos, with privilege gender over other axes of oppression, and reproduce inequalities and operate within "acceptable bounds of difference," avoiding issues of religion and spirituality.

While Conway provides a rich, nuanced, and sophisticated analysis of the WSF as praxis, she reproduces some of the same erasures and limits that she demonstrates in the WSF. For example, in her discussion of feminisms, while she acknowledges multiple feminisms, her analysis primarily engages one Latin American variation, Articulation Feminista Marcosur, and the global World March of Women. Dalit, Asian, Indigenous, Afro-descendant Latin American and

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Caribbean, and African feminisms are mentioned but not engaged systematically as they “did not leave written traces.” While it is important that she acknowledges that coloniality of knowledge and power shapes her book, and that other methods are needed to study the non-European ways in which the subaltern speak, it is not enough to continue privileging the privileged. The subaltern, uncritically singular, do not speak either at the WSF or in Conway’s book.

In noting this, I do not intend to diminish its rich contributions but only to echo her insight that to engage other worlds and epistemologies, we need other languages, and as long as we rely exclusively on the written, academic, and colonial languages we too see the subaltern only in their cultural and spectacular presence even as we critique it. Nonetheless, it is an admirable accomplishment and falls in the category of what Bevington and Dixon (2005) refer to as movement relevant theorizing, that will be read by activists as well as scholars and will hopefully inform their practices.

### References

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